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DECORATIVE DESIGNING AS A STUDY FOR CHILDREN

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This paper begins like a creed: "I believe." I believe that everyone can design. A little patience, a little coaching in the means of expression, and every person who reads these words could make a pattern. I believe it, but you do not. If you were given pencil and paper and told to make the simplest kind of a scheme—an arrangement of embroidered dots and scallops for a centerpiece, a braiding pattern for a gown, a design in cross-stitch for collar and cuffs—a good many of you would look aghast and say, "I can't do it." If I tell a child that he can make a design he believes me and forthwith, he makes one. Why is it? Perhaps there are several reasons for this. First, the child does not suffer from that curse of our oversensitized generation, self-distrust. Decorative designing is only one means of self-expression. The child does not share our morbid fear that there is nothing within worth expressing. With a self-confidence that has not yet been oftentimes shaken he believes in himself and in his own ability, and dares to try.

The child believes in his *message*. A design is only one way of telling a story and the child is an enthusiastic story-teller. How many times have you had him run to you breathless, eyes big with the wonder and the thrill of the encounter which he has just witnessed between a dog and a squirrel. His nature is stirred to its depths over the dramatic side of what would have seemed to you a trivial incident. For it is one of the penalties of becoming an Olympian that we lose the Arcadian scent for the dramatic, the significant, in the little happenings of every day. He tells the story as would the practical raconteur, not slurring over any of its details, not fumbling blindly for a place to stop lest you are already bored, and, unless you are one of those hope-

lessly "grown-up" people, you are interested with him in his tale. He believes in his story and in his material.

The power to *create* is part of our divinity, and the child, still "trailing" his "clouds of glory," has not yet bartered that power. The desire to create appears in all the child's activities. His imagination gives the spark of life to inanimate objects. He breathes upon them the breath of his own superabundant life, and they become instinct with life to him. As he is untrammelled by many precedents, and has no preconceived ideas of the world's standards, his Galatea always seems to him beautiful, and he takes in her the joy which is the necessary accompaniment of art. That painful ecstasy we find in the bodying forth of a bit of our own life and thought Oliver Wendell Holmes describes in telling of the poet's sensations at the birth of a poem. He says:

A lyric conception hits me like a bullet in the forehead. I have often had the blood drop from my cheeks when it struck, and felt that I turned white as death. Then comes a creeping of centipedes running down the spine, then a gasp and a great jump of the heart, then a sudden flush and a beating in the vessels of the head, then a long sigh, and the poem is written . . . not copied, but written. . . . It is enough to stun and scare anybody to have a hot thought come crashing into his brain and plowing up those parallel ruts where the wagon trains of common ideas were jogging along in their regular sequences of association.

Have you felt it? To the child oft comes this joy in the things which he creates, and with the creator's joy he sees that "it is good," and "behold, it is very good." It is good because it is frank, sincere, a true expression of the child's thought. It is good in the way the Aztec pottery, the Indian rugs and baskets are good. And if we can foster in the child, not crush these primitive instincts, we can lead him by the path mankind has followed, from the first rude imitations of the patterns his hand-craft has suggested toward such an expression of beauty as Milan Cathedral or the Parthenon.

But what is *beauty* and how are we to know that the standards of beauty which we set up are not false standards? In an interesting series of articles in the *Craftsman*, Ernest Batchelder says:

The beautiful thing is invariably sane and orderly in arrangement, clear and coherent in expression, frank and straightforward in its acceptance of all the conditions imposed by questions of use, environment, tools, materials, and processes.

Surely this is a safe standard; but do we accept it? Think of the various decoratively designed objects in our own homes: walls, curtains, floor coverings, table linen, dishes, silver, picture frames, toilet articles, books, costumes, jewels,—the list might be prolonged indefinitely. Do they exemplify the beauty that is sane and orderly in arrangement, clear and coherent in expression, and frank and straightforward in accepting the conditions imposed by questions of use, environment, tools, materials, and processes? Or do they show, rather, our blind acceptance of any design the manufacturer chooses to foist upon us, even when that design is only a servile copy of forms which, to quote, were once fresh, real and significant because they embodied in their expression something of the thoughts and feelings of the times in which they were used, but which now appear as misapplied finery.

Granted, then, that we are in sad need of real *designers*, and granted that every child is a designer in embryo, how shall we cultivate his instinct for self-expression, how foster his childlike faith in his message and in his power to create, how help him to develop that creative power, not binding him by the work of the past, as a convention, but helping him to profit by the mistakes and successes of others, through the ages, in their efforts to express what appeared to them as true and beautiful? We must use care in presenting to the child the treasures of the past. Imitation is perhaps as strong an instinct with him as creation, and unless he is guided in his choice of material, he will unite Egyptian scarabs, the Roman sacrificial ox, the salamander of Francis I, and Edward Penfield's hounds in one "happy family"!

Many writers adopt the theory that the *racial development in design* begins with the geometric forms undoubtedly suggested by the weaving, plaiting, tying, of the primitive industries; that side by side with this grows the desire to imitate graphically the human form and features and the various objects of nature that surround the embryonic artist. This, then, seems the logical

order to adopt in teaching the child to design. He must treat Nature and the art of the past as a storehouse from which to draw the materials he needs to express his own thoughts.

We find him quick to see analogies and to grasp the principles that apply equally to all forms of artistic expression, whether graphic, musical, or literary. He sees easily that the story of the little boy who hated to bathe in the sea, and therefore spent his days dipping up water in his little tin pail—dipping up water and pouring it away, dipping up water and pouring it away, dipping up water and pouring it away—may be very efficacious in putting a baby to sleep, but is somewhat lacking in dramatic interest. He realizes that one note drummed over and over on the piano does not make music, and that a sheet of clean white paper neatly ruled with even lines does not make a design—and he begins to understand the first great principle of designing—that of *variety*. He is willing to excuse us, perhaps with a little reminiscent twinge of conscience, for the times he has needed excuse, when we rap upon the table to show him that a monotonous, cadenceless rapping is as annoying as the dripping of water and is lacking in the element of interest, but that the instant we introduce a rhythm, he is on the alert to see whether we will repeat it—the element of *interest* has been introduced.

He will make a design for a striped gingham, using only the material which we despised in the case of the ruled sheet of tablet paper—straight lines all running in the same direction, by merely varying these intervals. He will see that he can whistle his design, making a bird call out of its meter. He will see that widths of mouldings, arrangements of braid and tucking on garments, and all the various stripes and plaids in fabrics are but the illustration of this one simple principle.

In a similar manner he gains knowledge of the principle of *unity*. He sees that, as the wind blows sticks and dead leaves and swirls of dust about, or the current of the swift-flowing stream influences the flotsam and jetsam on its surface, compelling them into the semblance of a pattern, so his will and the underlying current of his thought can lead all sorts of unrelated forms into harmony and make of them a unit, an entity. He learns

that a form, without which his design is complete, is an intruder and must be shut out; that a form, no matter how pleasing in itself, which does not help the harmony of the whole, is a disrupting member and, unless it can be influenced by the prevailing spirit of the whole, must be dispensed with. He learns to be a peacemaker between warring elements, modifying them in unessential characteristics that they may uphold and strengthen their neighbors and establish harmony in the group.

He comes to understand *symmetry* in its simple form where the two halves of his pattern are identical and also the subtler form of symmetry where the balance is maintained by carefully calculated opposing masses differing in color and value. He learns the part color plays in a scheme of design and discovers how to oppose and blend hues to obtain the wonderful effects he admires in nature.

It is but a step from the division of a space into interestingly related masses arranged in stripes to the breaking up of a square panel into dominant and subordinate masses, working always from the big to the smaller, not filling up a space with small detail.

From the problem of the square we proceed to the circle, the oblong, the border, the all-over pattern, and each problem is developed into an object for which the child can see definite purpose (for example, the square is stenciled in a sofa pillow, the triangle in leather or metal becomes a blotter corner, etc.), thus helping the child by the works of his own hands to fit into the great world of adult life in which he is so often only the eagerly curious looker-on.

I might tell you how we bring to the child's attention the ideas of proportion, balance, of rhythm and movement in design, and how quickly he applies the ideas to his everyday problems, but I am anxious to suggest one other phase of the subject for your consideration. I am convinced that the study of design has a distinct ethical bearing; that, rightly taught, it should aid in character building as well as in the acquirement of mental and manual dexterity in combining lines and forms. Surely the frail germ of beauty in the child's soul, brooded over in the effort to

give it adequate expression, grows and develops, and only spreads its wings to leave room for another beautiful thought.

The study of design strengthens the child intellectually; he must learn to give a reason for his intuitive choice of one form instead of another. His study of proportion, of emphasis, and of the gradual unfolding of a design teaches him lessons which philosophy only states in another language. In his strivings for rhythm he is brought into accord with—to quote Hamilton Mabie—“the flow of rivers, the procession of stars, the antiphony of day and night, the silent but inviolate order of the seasons.” He begins to realize the melodic tendency in all kinds of action, “as if nature drew into the vast flow of things all lesser works or sounds,” and that “to move with it is to be part of the fathomless movement of life which the universe reveals and illustrates.” When the child has proved this in his own experience, he feels that he has allied himself with all the constructive forces that are moving in an orderly and stately way toward the upbuilding of the true and beautiful in this world.